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Safe Handling of Take-Out Foods



Take-Out and Delivered Foods

Holiday Meals, Picnics, Tailgate Parties, or Just a Busy Day

In today's busy world, take-out and delivered foods are experiencing runaway popularity. Some foods are hot and some are cold when purchased. Foods from fast food restaurants are most often consumed immediately. Take-out foods may be purchased in advance for eating at a later time, such as a party platter or a cooked holiday meal. No matter what the occasion, more and more people are relying on others to prepare their food.

Perishable foods can cause illness when mishandled. Proper handling of the food and the leftovers is essential to ensure the food is safe for you to eat.

2-HOUR RULE

To keep hot foods safe, keep them at 140 °F or above. Cold foods must be kept at 40 °F or below. Bacteria grow rapidly between 40 and 140 °F. Discard all perishable foods such as meat, poultry, eggs, and casseroles, left at room temperature longer than 2 hours; 1 hour in air temperatures above 90 °F.

**Keep HOT Food HOT!
Keep COLD Food COLD!**

If you are not eating the take-out or delivered food immediately, follow these guidelines to make sure the food remains safe for you to eat at a later time.

Hot Take-Out or Delivered Food

Once food is cooked, it should be held hot, at an internal temperature of 140 °F or above. Just keeping food warm (between 40 and 140 °F) is not safe. Use a food thermometer to monitor the internal temperature of the food. A preheated oven, chafing dishes, preheated warming trays, or slow cookers may be used.

If you plan to eat at a later time, take-out or delivered food should be divided into smaller portions or pieces, placed in shallow containers, and refrigerated.

Cold/Refrigerated Take-Out or Delivered Food

Cold foods should be kept at 40 °F or below.

Refrigerate perishable foods as soon as possible, always within 2 hours after purchase or delivery. If the food is in air temperatures above 90 °F, refrigerate within 1 hour.

Keep foods cold on the buffet table by nesting serving dishes of food in bowls of ice. Use small platters and replace them with fresh refrigerated platters of food often, rather than adding fresh food to a serving dish already on the table.

When take-out or delivered food is purchased cold for an outdoor event—like a picnic, sporting event, or outdoor buffet—a cooler with ice is a practical alternative to a refrigerator. The cooler should be packed with plenty of ice or frozen gel packs. Keep the cooler in the shade when possible.

Remember the 2-hour rule when food is removed from the cooler. Discard all perishable foods that have been left at outside temperatures longer than 2 hours; 1 hour in air temperatures above 90 °F.

LEFTOVERS?

Discard all perishable foods, such as meat, poultry, eggs, and casseroles, left at room temperature longer than 2 hours; 1 hour in air temperatures above 90 °F. This includes leftovers taken home from a restaurant. Some exceptions to this rule are foods such as cookies, crackers, bread and whole fruits.

Whole roasts, hams, and turkeys should be sliced or cut into smaller pieces or portions before storing them in the refrigerator or freezer. Turkey legs, wings, and thighs may be left whole.

Refrigerate or freeze leftovers in shallow containers. Wrap or cover the food.

REFRIGERATOR STORAGE AT 40 °F OR BELOW

Cooked meat or poultry	3 to 4 days
Pizza	3 to 4 days
Luncheon meats	3 to 5 days
Egg, tuna, and macaroni salads	3 to 5 days

Foods stored longer may begin to spoil or become unsafe to eat. Do not taste.

FREEZER STORAGE AT 0 °F OR BELOW

Cooked meat or poultry	2 to 6 months
Pizza	1 to 2 months
Luncheon meats	1 to 2 months

Salads made with mayonnaise do not freeze well.

Foods kept frozen longer than recommended storage times are safe but may be drier and not taste as good.

WHEN IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT!

Follow These Guidelines for Cooked, Refrigerated, or Frozen Take-Out and Delivered Meals

THAWING MEALS

Thaw the wrapped, cooked meat or poultry on a tray in the refrigerator. Allow about 24 hours for every 5 pounds. Small packages of cooked stuffing, gravy, potatoes, etc., will take less time to thaw and can be taken out of the freezer and put into the refrigerator at a later time.

Once the cooked meat or poultry and side dishes thaw, plan to eat them within 3 to 4 days.

The food may be eaten cold or reheated.

Frozen food can be put directly into the oven without thawing.

REHEATING MEALS

Reheat foods containing meat or poultry to an internal temperature of at least 165 °F. Always use a food thermometer to verify the internal temperature of the food.

Reheat sauces, soups, and gravies to a boil.

If reheating in the oven, set oven temperature no lower than 325 °F.

Reheating in slow cookers and chafing dishes is NOT recommended because foods may stay in the "Danger Zone" (between 40 and 140 °F) too long.

When reheating food in the microwave oven, cover and rotate food for even heating. Always allow standing time before checking the internal temperature of the food.

Consult your microwave oven owner's manual for recommended times and power levels.

LOOK FOR THE USDA OR STATE MARK OF INSPECTION



The inspection mark on the packaging tells you the product was prepared in a USDA or State-inspected plant under controlled conditions. Follow the package directions for thawing, reheating, and storing.



United States Department of Agriculture
Food Safety and Inspection Service
Food Safety Education Staff

For more food safety information, contact:
USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline
1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)
TTY: 1-800-256-7072
E-mail: mphotline.fsis@usda.gov

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